



Urban Impermanence on the Southern Malay Peninsula: The Case of Batu Sawar Johor (1587-c.1615)

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Received 10 Jan 2021: Accepted 2 Apr 2021

ABSTRACT

This article examines the urban example of Batu Sawar which served as the capital of the Johor kingdom between 1587 and circa 1615. Around the middle of the eighteenth-century European reference works continued to describe Batu Sawar as the capital of Johor, even though the city had long ceased to serve as a trading center, let alone as Johor's capital, and probably no longer existed. Such observations raise the question of urban impermanence—the transience of sizeable settlements with reference to the Malay Archipelago. Two overarching questions form the backbone of the investigation: First, why did Batu Sawar rise as a regional trading center, and second, what are the reasons that contributed to its decline? Batu Sawar's fate was sealed by a combination of factors that included poor defenses, multiple external shocks, destruction by fire, court politics and rivalry between the early colonial powers.

Key Words: Southeast Asian studies, early modern Johor, maritime and overland trade, geopolitics, Malaya, Batu Sawar, urban impermanence

I . Introduction

The urban trading centers of the southern Malay Peninsula were, by pre-modern standards, densely populated settlements that rose and fell in comparatively short cycles lasting a about century or less. In the late Medieval and early modern periods, the ports of Temasek-Singapura (ancient Singapore, fourteenth century) and the Melaka sultanate (c.1400-1528) are probably among the best researched, but there are of course others. Extant research has drawn on several models to explain how and why settlements on the Peninsula rose, declined, eclipsed, or shifted location, drawing upon an array of possible historical turning points. They include but are not limited to natural phenomena such as riverine silting, floods, tsunamis, earthquakes, or shifting weather patterns; and man-made developments that include political contest, war, and shifts in economic activity. With reference to the southern Malay Peninsula the best-research case of urban prosperity and disappearance is without doubt Singapore,¹⁾ though it is admittedly only one of several settlements located at or near the Johor River estuary that experienced similar fates during the late Medieval and early modern periods.

The present article examines one of these upstream capitals of the Johor River region from the early modern period known as Batu Sawar. This focus determines both the geographic scope as well as the temporal period under review: Batu Sawar served as the royal administrative center of the Johor kingdom for about three decades at the turn of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and briefly again in the 1670s. This earlier period of Batu Sawar's prosperity is framed by two catastrophic events that made and shaped the city's fate: the destruction of the former capital Johor Lama by the Portuguese in 1587 and the destruction of Batu Sawar by fire at the time of the Acehnese attacks on Johor in 1613 and 1615.²⁾

Despite its impermanence, Batu Sawar continued to live in the circulation of knowledge in Europe well into the eighteenth century, even though the city had long ceased to serve as the capital and probably no longer existed as a settlement. The city's imagined continuation through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries is almost identical to the case of nearby Singapore which was also described

1) Hack, K., Margolin, J. L., & Delaye, K., eds. (2010). *Singapore from Temasek to the 21st century: Reinventing the global city*. Singapore: NUS Press; Miksic, J. M. 2012. *Singapore and the Silk Road of the Sea*. Singapore: NUS Press; Kwa, C. G. (2017). *Pre-colonial Singapore*. Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies & Straits Times Press; Borschberg, P. & Khoo, B. J. Q. 2018. Singapore as a Port City, c.1290-1819: Evidence, Frameworks and Challenges, *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* (hereafter *JMBRAS*), 91(1), 1-27; Kwa, C. G., Heng, D., Borschberg, P. & Tan, T. Y. 2019. *Seven Hundred Years: A History of Singapore*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish.

2) MacGregor, I. A. 1955. Johore Lama in the Sixteenth Century, *JMBRAS*, 28(2), 48-125; Kwa et al. *Op. cit.*, 130-134.

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as a functioning port city in dictionaries and glossaries right up to its refounding by the British in 1819.³⁾ Although Batu Sawar is mentioned in extant Malay literature from the early modern period, most of what is known from texts about it and other settlements of the Johor River derives from European sources, especially from documentation written by the Portuguese and the Dutch. In fact, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) had one of its early Asian factories located at Batu Sawar. The surviving papers and published eyewitness accounts relating to Dutch on-the-spot operations offer important insights into Batu Sawar's size, features, and commercial practices. Published testimonies doubtlessly formed the basis for the many entries on the city found in early modern glossaries, reference works, and geographical handbooks.

Based on written testimonies this article examines Batu Sawar's role as a royal administrative center of Johor over the course of around three decades between 1587 and 1615. So far, this trading center has not been substantially discussed in the existing secondary literature.⁴⁾ Noteworthy earlier references and exposés can be found in the published studies by Gerret Pieter Rouffaer (1921, 2018), Richard Winstedt (1932), MAP Meilink-Roelofs (1962), and Leonard Andaya (1975), though in these the discussion of Batu Sawar represents just a facet in a larger picture.⁵⁾ These can be supplemented by some articles published by Gibson-Hill, Sieveking, MacGregor and Wheatley that document Johor Lama ('Old Johor'), Batu Sawar's predecessor, and discuss other upstream towns of the Johor River region with a focus on the late sixteenth century.⁶⁾ In view of the sparse secondary research available on Batu Sawar, this article makes a valuable contribution toward the city's history during the transition from the late sixteenth to the early seventeenth centuries. Two overarching questions shall be addressed and answered: Why did Batu Sawar become a significant center of trade? And why did it later disappear? Both questions shall be answered with special reference to the idea of impermanence. However, let us first familiarize ourselves with this settlement by exploring what a researcher of the early modern era might have been able to know about it based on handbooks and reference works.

3) Hassel, J. G. H. 1817. *Geographisch-Statistisches Handwörterbuch: nach den neuesten Quellen und Hilfsmitteln*, 2 vols. Weimar: Im Verlage des geographischen Instituts, II, 406.

4) Details of these publications are discussed below.

5) The present article expands on an earlier exposé: Borschberg, P. 2016. 'Batu Sawar Johor: A Regional Trading Centre in the late 16th and early 17th Centuries', Ooi K. G. and Hoang A. T. eds., *Early Modern Southeast Asia, 1350-1800*. London: Routledge, 136-163.

6) MacGregor, *Op. cit.*; Gibson-Hill, C. A. 1955. 'Johore Lama and other ancient sites on the Johore River, *JMBRAS*, 28(2), 127-197; Sieveking, G. de, Wheatley, P. and Gibson-Hill, C. A. 1954. 'The investigations at Johore Lama', *JMBRAS*, 27(1): 224-233.

What could a researcher readily find and learn about Batu Sawar, the former capital of Johor in, say, the eighteenth century? Carl Günter Ludewig (1707-1778), who also went by the surname “Ludevici”, was a German philosopher, Orientalist, librarian, and lexicographer who served as professor at the University of Leipzig in today’s Germany. Ludewig is the compiler of a compendium published in 1741-1743 as the *Allgemeine Schatz-Kammer der Kauffmannschafft* (General Treasure Chamber of Business).⁷⁾ It features under the letter “I” an entry for *Ihor* (Johor) the full text of which translates from pre-modern German as follows:

Ihor or Giohor (Johor), an Indian kingdom on the peninsula beyond the Ganges. The kingdom is situated in the southern region of India, on the mainland, nearby Melaka, which for this reason was often attacked by the king of Johor. The city from which [the kingdom] has received its name stands on stilts, close to a river by the same name that flows into the sea at the promontory of Syncapura (Singapore). There is a good port here. The largest part of the city is called Batusaber (Batu Sawar) and the smaller part is called Conta-Sabron (Kota Seberang). The land is very fertile with pepper and other goods. The inhabitants are Muslims, are quite brave and love to trade. They also love shipping, and all the neighboring islands are almost their colonies and depend on their government.⁸⁾

The information contained in this entry ultimately derives from the published travel account, or *Journal*, of the VOC admiral Cornelis Matelieff who visited Batu Sawar during its heyday in the year 1606.⁹⁾ This publication mentions the houses built on stilts and the settlement Kota Seberang which was situated slightly downstream on the opposite bank of the Johor River. Those compendia from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that feature an entry either for Johor, or separately for Batu Sawar, paraphrase the information originally found in Matelieff’s *Journal*. By the time Ludewig published his business lexicon around the middle of the eighteenth century, however, the

7) Savary des Brûlons, J. & Ludovici, C. G. 1741-1743. *Allgemeine Schatz-Kammer Der Kauffmannschafft Oder Vollständiges Lexicon Aller Handlungen und Gewerbe So wohl in Deutschland als auswärtigen Königreichen und Ländern*, 5 vols. Leipzig: Verlag Johann Samuel Heinsius.

8) Savary & Ludewig. 1741-1743, *Op. cit.*, II, 1067.

9) Valentijn, F. 1724-1726. *Oud en Nieuw Oost-Indiën*. Te Dordrecht: Joannes van Braam, boekverkooper; Hervey, D. F. A. tr. 1885. François Valentyn’s Account of Malacca, *Journal of the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 16(1), 289-301; Winstedt, R. O. 1932. A History of Johore, *JMBRAS*, 10(3), 1-167, at 29; Borschberg, P. 2017. The Value of Admiral Matelieff’s Writings for Studying the History of Southeast Asia, c.1600-20, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 48(3), 414-435. Matelieff’s account evidently also forms the basis of Valentijn’s description of Batu Sawar.

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capital of Johor had long moved out of the Johor River region to Bintan in the nearby Riau islands. Batu Sawar had also vanished, but it continued to endure in the imagination of European researchers and writers.

Why are these observations important and what can the reader take away from this introduction? Though Batu Sawar was a known and documented riverine port and settlement based on published eyewitness accounts, its disappearance went unnoticed in Europe because of different ideas about the resilience of fortified cities. This had less to do with Batu Sawar than with European understandings of urban permanence. Basing their insights on documentation from the previous century, eighteenth-century compilers of reference works continued to write of Batu Sawar as if it still existed and still thrived as an urban trading center. They continued to regard it as a fortified trading city at the Johor River that was inhabited by Muslims and featured houses built on stilts. A secondary settlement, Kota Seberang, was located on the opposite bank of the river. Unknown to these eighteenth-century compilers of compendia, however, was that Batu Sawar had eclipsed. To answer the question why Batu Sawar declined it is necessary to investigate the reasons how and why it had become an important trading center to begin with. These thoughts lead us to our first overarching question.

II. Why did Batu Sawar become a significant center of trade in the region?

The factors that made Batu Sawar an important trading center in the Southern Malay Peninsula can be broken down into two broad areas: first, the advantages of its geographic location, and second, the policies that had been put in place to encourage and manage trade. These two points now merit a more detailed discussion.

1. Geographic location

In the first two centuries after its founding in 1528, Johor's capital shifted location several times, usually in response to an attack by enemies. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, this center moved up and down to different locations along the Johor River: Sayong Pinang (1528-35), Johor Lama (Kota Batu, 1535-87), Batu Sawar (1587-c.1615), Makam Tauhid (1641-2), briefly back to Batu Sawar (1670) and then Kota Tinggi (1685-99) before transferring out of the Johor River region

altogether (c.1710) to the islands Bintan and Lingga.¹⁰⁾ The Johor River region stood at the confluence of maritime, riverine, and overland trading routes. In early modern times, the island of Singapore with its port and settlement by the same name was understood and depicted in early cartography as an island in the greater Johor River estuary. The Tebrau (or Johor) Strait that separates the northern shores of Singapore from the Johor mainland was on account of its rapid water flows during tidal changes thought to represent one of two major arms of the Johor River.¹¹⁾

Arguably, the most significant cartographer of the region from the early modern period was the Eurasian adventurer and mathematician Manuel Godinho de Erédia who was born to a father from Aragon and a mother who was a princess from the island of Sulawesi (Celebes). Erédia is the author of two important treatises on the socio-economic conditions of Portuguese Melaka, its immediate hinterland, and of the Straits region at large.¹²⁾ He also drew several maps of the peninsula, Singapore, the straits, and of Sumatra which he prepared in conjunction with a reconnaissance mission into the interior of the Malay Peninsula in 1602 as well as a Portuguese naval expedition against Johor in 1604.¹³⁾ His first-hand experience with the region familiarized him with the resources available as well as the flows of trade in the interior of the peninsula, on the rivers, and along the coasts. On one of his draft maps of the Malay Peninsula which formed part of the *Atlas Miscellânea*, or *Miscellany Atlas* (c.1622),¹⁴⁾ Erédia depicted riverine trading networks and overland trails that crossed the peninsula from east to west via the Pahang and Muar Rivers. It also features a series of trails running along a north-south axis that originated in the north at Phattalung in today's Thailand and terminated in the south at locations along the Johor River and the nearby around Tanjung Ramunia (Cape Romania) at the South China Sea.¹⁵⁾ Two locations stand out in particular: first, "Iohor", New Johor or Batu Sawar,

10) Winstedt, R. O. 1932. *Op. cit.* 1-167.

11) Linschoten, J. H. van. 1939. *Itinerario. Voyage ofte Schipvaert van Jan Huygen van Linschoten naer Oost ofte Portugaels Indien, 1579-1592, and Reys-geschrift vande navigatiën der Portugaloyzers*, Kern, H. & Warnsinck, J. C. M., eds, 2nd edn. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, vol. V, 97-99; Brito Rebello, J. I. de, ed. 1903. *Livro de Marinharia. Tratado da Agulha de Marear de João de Lisboa. Roteiros, sondos, e outros conhecimentos relativos à navegação, Codice do século XVI, etc.* Lisbon: Imprensa Lipanio da Silva, 269.

12) Borschberg, P. 2019. Three early-17th century maps by Manuel Godinho de Erédia, *JMBRAS*, 92(2), 1-28.

13) Everaert, J. G. 2001. Introduction, in Erédia, M.G. de, *Suma de Árvores e Plantas da Índia Intra Ganges*, Everaert, J. G., Mendes Ferrão, J. E. & Cândida Liberato, M. eds.. Lisbon: Comissão Nacional para as Comemorações dos Descobrimientos Portugueses.

14) Cortesão, A. & Teixeira da Mota, A. 1987. *Portugaliae Monumenta Cartographica*, 9 vols. Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional-Casa da Moeda, vol. IV, plate 417C.

15) Borschberg, P. 2019. *Op. cit.*, 4-6.

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and second “Cotabato” (Kota Batu), that is Johor Lama (Old Johor).

Johor Lama served as Johor’s royal administrative center (capital) from 1535 until its destruction by the Portuguese in 1587.¹⁶⁾ The reasons underlying Portugal’s attack in that year are complex and should be seen in connection with the way in which Johor Lama was competing against Portuguese Melaka as a commercial trading center. Both before and after 1587 Johor Lama served as a noteworthy place of trade. This is as far as the large ocean-going vessels could proceed upriver. Here at Johor Lama cargoes would be redistributed on to smaller vessels that would then proceed farther upstream to the new capital variously called “New Johor”, or Batu Sawar, in the sources. Judging by Erédia’s map of the Peninsula, Johor Lama was also the terminal point of some overland trails that extended northwards.

The reasons for moving the new capital to this upstream location are twofold: the first relates to security. Unlike Johor Lama, Batu Sawar could not be reached by large ocean-going vessels. The early colonial powers thus could not send their large ships with heavy artillery to shell the city, and it was sufficiently removed from the coast that it was not suitable for hit and run attacks by maritime raiders. The second has to do with accessibility to the sea. As the Dutch sources inform, Batu Sawar was in a part of the Johor River that was still influenced by the tides. The water flowed downstream during the outgoing tide and conversely flowed upstream when the tide was rising. This made it easier for trading vessels to rely on a combination of both winds and river flows to reach Batu Sawar. There were also certain topographical advantages that will be addressed below in the context of Admiral Cornelis Matelieff’s description of the city.

The town of Singapore is located to the South of Johor Lama on the northern side of the Singapore Strait. After the fall of Melaka city to the Portuguese in 1511, Singapore’s port experienced a revival. It played the role as gatekeeper to the Johor River and its upstream towns, including the successive royal administrative centers located here. Commercially it played a similar role to Johor Lama after 1587, namely as a collection and intermodular transshipment center where goods were placed on smaller vessels that could sail upriver. Singapore was reportedly also a base, or perhaps even the main base, of the Johor navy which around 1595 comprised sixteen oared galleys according to the Dominican historian, friar, and bishop Diego Francisco de Aduarte.¹⁷⁾ Why are these insights important? Johor has a history of shifting capitals since founding of the sultanate in 1528. Though

16) Winstedt, R. O. 1932, *Op. cit.*, 130.

17) Aduarte, D. 1640. *Historia de la Provincia del Sancto Rosario de la Orden de Predicadores en Philipinas, Japon, y China*. Manila: En el Colegio de Sancto Thomas, por Luis Beltran impressor de libros, 227.

Batu Sawar was a newly constructed or expanded settlement after 1587, it was in a region that had proven to be strategically important on account of its broad location at the crossroads of maritime, riverine and overland traffic, as well as in its role as a collection center for commodities of the sea and jungle.

2. Batu Sawar

Located about thirty-five kilometers up the Johor River from the sea, Batu Sawar served twice as Johor's capital: once at the turn of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and briefly again in the early 1670s when it was attacked and destroyed for a third time during the Jambi Wars in 1673.¹⁸⁾ Most of what we know about the city as a regional trading center stems from a handful of eyewitness accounts and documents from the first and second decades of the seventeenth century.

Admiral Matelieff's description of the capital Batu Sawar dating from the year 1606 is the single most substantive account, and historically is the most influential description. It not only forms the basis of knowledge about Batu Sawar for many standard reference works, glossary, and geographical dictionaries of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but also of the learned discussions of Rouffaer¹⁹⁾ and Winstedt via François Valentijn.²⁰⁾ The following section from Matelieff's published *Journal* describes the layout and appearance of the city is reproduced here in English translation.

The town of Batu Sawar is situated up the Johor River, approximately five or six miles [about 35-45km] from the sea. The river is very beautiful, wide, and deep, [and depending on the tide] flows either up or down along the banks before the city, but here the water is fresh. The land is mostly flat. The population generally lives along the river. The houses stand on stilts. What is meant by the term 'fortress' consists of two things: one is Batu Sawar and the other situated on the opposite bank of the river is called Kota Seberang. Batu Sawar measures about 1,300 *treden* [paces] around, is square in its layout, and features high palisades that are closely lined up against one another and measure 40 feet high. There are some fortifications

18) Hoffman, J. E. 1972. Early Policies of the Malacca Jurisdiction of the United East India Company. The Malay Peninsula and the Netherlands East Indies Attachment, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 3(1), 1-38 at 23.

19) Rouffaer, G. P. 1921. Was Malaka Emporium vóór 1400 A. D. genaamd Malajoer? En waar lag Woerawari, Ma-Hasin, Langka, Batoesawar?, *Bijdragen en Mededelingen van het Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- und Volkenkunde*, 77, 1-174 & 359-604; Rouffaer, G. P. 2018. Was Melaka an Emporium named Malayur before 1400?, Kwa, C. G. & Borschberg, P. eds, *Studying Singapore before 1800*. Singapore: NUS Press, 81-117.

20) Winstedt, R. O. 1932, *Op. cit.*

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which cover the flank, but these are not well constructed. It is situated on a level plain close by the river. The closest hills are situated about a quarter of a mile from here. It is easily possible to divert the river around the city. Inside, the city is densely populated featuring straw [atap] houses, except for the residence of the king and of some other noblemen, which are constructed of wood. There are an estimated 3,000 to 4,000 fighting men in Batu Sawar and Kota Seberang together, but most of the population lives outside the enclosed city. In times of danger, these people completely burn down their homes and head into the walled city, because they can quickly rebuild a house, each man with his slaves. ... Kota Seberang may measure about 400 or 500 *treden* in circumference and is also square in its layout. Not many people live here, and where they live there are also [wooden] palisades along the riverbank. The land is flat and is flooded during all spring tides...²¹⁾

The description of houses built on stilts, the circumference of the enclosed twin settlements on opposite banks of the river, as well as the population of three to four thousand men of arms-bearing age are snippets of information that found their way into European compendia entries of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, including notably Antoine Augustin Bruzen de la Martinière and Johann Heinrich Zedler.²²⁾ Despite the familiarity with these details, I draw attention to three additional observations that are important in the context of the present discussion.

Based on the information found in his *Journal*, Matelieff had ideas about permanent urban defenses which he had brought with him from the European theatre of war. He carefully surveyed Batu Sawar's geographical location and defensive structures and specifically found two features wanting. The first concerns defensive structures that may have covered the flank, but these were poorly built on a plain that was located near the river. This means that when there was high water or alternatively when there was a spring tide, the plain (and consequently also the fortification structures built on it) would have been flooded. The second observation has to do with the city's exposure on the side of the nearby hills. One way to improve Batu Sawar's condition, Matelieff claimed, was to dig a canal, route part of the river through this, and so have the town surrounded by water as a form of protection against enemies and fire. An additional layer of protection came from the wooden palisades

21) Matelieff, C. 2015. *Journal, memorials and letters of Admiral Cornelis Matelieff de Jonge*, Borschberg, P. ed. Singapore: NUS Press.

22) Martinière, A. A. Bruzen de la. 1726-1739. *Le Grand Dictionnaire Géographique et Critique*. The Hague: Chez Gosse, Alberts & de Hondt, I, 113-4; Zedler, J. H. 1731-1754. *Grosses vollständiges Universal-Lexicon Aller Wissenschaften und Künste*, 64 vols. Leipzig: Verlegt J. H. Zedler, III, cols. 1265-1266.

that enclosed the main part of the city where the palace and other important structures were located. These palisades were typically sunk into a mound comprising earth and rocks. This type of wooden fortification was also found in other nearby locations such as Johor Lama and evidently fourteenth-century Singapore. The earthen mounds of Temasek-Singapore's former defenses survived until the early nineteenth century when they were described and mapped by John Crawfurd, Singapore's second British resident.²³⁾

Matelieff makes a third observation that is important to the present discussion: in times of danger the people living outside the enclosed urban nucleus practiced a defensive strategy that involved torching their homes and seeking refuge within the enclosed part of the city. This was a strategy commonly pursued to deny food and shelter to the approaching enemy. Once the danger passed or the enemy had withdrawn, the housing outside the city could be quickly reconstructed of perishable materials such as bamboo, wood, and atap. It is not certain why Matelieff mentions this defensive strategy of immolating residences and strategically retreating. At the time of his visit to the city in 1606, Batu Sawar had only recently been relieved of a crippling riverine blockade and Portuguese attack on the Johor River towns in the final weeks of the year 1603 and early 1604.²⁴⁾ The Portuguese had launched their assault in retaliation for Johor's encouragement and assistance to the Dutch in plundering the richly laden merchant ship *Santa Catarina* off the coast of Singapore in February 1603. Matelieff is most probably describing what had transpired in Batu Sawar during this earlier Portuguese attack on the city. While Matelieff took a very good look at Batu Sawar's defensive structures, he lost few words on the source of its prosperity through trade. To learn more about that we need to explore a few sources that were not readily available to readers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that include the VOC factory records and writings of the Flemish merchant Jacques de Coutre who lived in Melaka and visited Batu Sawar on several occasions between 1595 and 1602.

3. Trading center

Just how much business was going on in Batu Sawar during its heyday? Moreover, what was being traded there, and how was trade conducted? Perhaps the most succinct reference to Batu Sawar as a center of trade can be found in the writings of the aforementioned merchant De Coutre. Here we find some brief statements that are particularly illuminating:

23) Kwa et al. *Op. cit.*, 30, 33.

24) *Ibid.*, 124-6.

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[The city] that was built after the city of Johor Lama was ruined is called Batu Sawar. Now we call this other city 'New Johor'. It is a port frequented by many carracks from diverse nations. ... And it has a beautiful river and a port with many large and small ships, and it is a land where merchants do vast volumes of trade and there are abundant provisions. ...

In the aforementioned city of [New] Johor, there are many people who make a living only from merchandise and from sailing from one land to another.²⁵⁾

These observations are echoed in the VOC history compiled and written by the company advocate Pieter van Dam at the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Commenting on Johor in general, he observed that, although the land did not yield much commodities or foodstuffs of its own, it certainly had locational advantages that enabled it to rise as a center of trade. The VOC could not ignore it. He wrote:

From the beginning the [Dutch] Company maintained a factory in Johor, [a kingdom] which borders the land of Melaka; not that [Johor] is a land that has, or can deliver, much of itself, but in that it is well located for trade, and it always had a lot of maritime traffic.²⁶⁾

The significance of Johor as a port was also underscored in the seventeenth century Portuguese language "Explanation of the Plans and Description of all of the Fortresses, Cities and Towns which the Portuguese have in the eastern Estado da Índia" dating from the period 1622-1633. Here we read:

The port of Johor is located inside Romania Point (Tanjung Ramunia), where many vessels are built; it has many provisions, eaglewood, and pitch; the city of Bintan is on the opposite shore ...²⁷⁾

Another Iberian source penned by Pedro Barreto de Resende confirms Johor's role in trade but specifically references a port in the Singapore Straits named Bullã, today's Bulan or possibly Belakang Padang in the southern Singapore Strait. Barreto de Resende observed:

25) Coutre, J. de. 2014. *The Memoirs and Memorials of Jacques de Coutre. Security, Trade and Society in 17th-Century Southeast Asia*, Borschberg, P., ed. & Roy, R. tr. Singapore: NUS Press, 2014, 93, 241.

26) Dam, P. van. 1931-43. *Beschryvinge van de Oostindische Compagnie*, Stapel, F. W. ed., 8 vols. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, II.1, 328.

27) Costa Veiga, A. Botelho da, ed. 1936. *Relação das Plantas & Descrições de todas as Fortalezas, Cidades & Povoações que os Portuguezes tem no Estado da India Oriental*. Lisbon: Biblioteca Nacional, 45.

This king of Johor and Pahang [also] has other inhabited islands here that are of minor significance. In this area next to the Singapore Strait is the port of Bullā [Bulan] which is densely populated by Malays [and] frequented in the manner of many merchants of the whole East Indies to sell their spices from which the king of Pahang [and Johor] reaps considerable revenue.²⁸⁾

The Spanish, Portuguese and Dutch language materials convey the same impression: Johor was a busy and prosperous port where ships from many nations called to trade. The wealth and prosperity of its inhabitants are alluded to in several documents that address how Batu Sawar's inhabitants dressed fashionably, or in the words of De Coutre "they are Malays and very smartly dressed".²⁹⁾ Matelieff too noted that there was a demand in Batu Sawar for cotton cloth and "other knick-knacks".³⁰⁾ Evidently, the Johor River region was also a place of industry where "many vessels are built"; there were blacksmiths forging weapons, while other reports speak of drying and salting of fish or pickling shad roe. Erédia described the situation thus: "Others occupy themselves with trade and commerce in spices and metals. [The common people] are accomplished craftsmen [and are also skilled at metallurgy], imparting a fine temper to iron and steel for making arms. [From fishing] they derive great profit. There are no weavers".³¹⁾ With reference to fishing activities Erédia underscored: "[T]he western seacoast of Ujong Tanah [Malay Peninsula] was inhabited only by the *selates* [sea nomads] fishermen who had no other trade or business but fishing for shad; they used the roes, called Turabos, which they pickled in brine. The fish is estimated more highly than any other by the Malay nobles".³²⁾ Also: "Bengkalis is a small port with beautiful shads that lay eggs known as the *Turubos* of Bengkalis. There is a full-time shahbandar appointed by the king of Johor, or Batu Sawar, because [Bengkalis] is a settlement attached to his royal court".³³⁾ In a similar vein Meilink-Roelofs observed: "Of the non-valuable goods, fish was still an important product as far as Johore was concerned, and dried and salted varieties were exported to different parts of the archipelago, just as in the time

28) Albuquerque, B. de. 1875-1895. *Commentaries of the Great Afonso Dalboquerque, Second Viceroy of India*, Birch, W. de Gray. ed. and tr., 4 vols. London: Hakluyt Society, III, 273-4.

29) Coutre, J. de., *Op. cit.*, 94.

30) Matelieff, C., *Op. cit.*, 295.

31) Erédia, M. G. de. 1930. Eredia's Description of Malacca, Meridional India and Cathay, *JMBRAS* 8(1), 1-288, 39.

32) *Ibid.*, 80.

33) *Ibid.*, 241.

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of the sultanate of Malacca”.³⁴⁾ There was a sense of abundance because Johor had many provisions readily available for sale or barter. These testimonies most certainly do not convey the image of a commercial or societal backwater. The wealth was not just concentrated in a few hands, and consumers had purchasing power to procure imports. This wealth was made possible by the proactive commercial policies of the Johor ruler who is said to have been “a very magnanimous king” and who was “greatly respected by the foreigners”.³⁵⁾ He also used proxies to encourage foreign merchants to come and trade at his port, as the “Information on Diverse Lands and Islands Situated in the East Indies” ascribed to Stalpaert van der Wiele dating from the opening years of the 1600s testifies: “The residents of Johor often trade in Banda, and they have asked me sometimes why we [the Dutch] do not come to trade there [in Johor] and that the king would like to have seen this”.³⁶⁾

More details of what was traded and in what quantities can be gleaned from De Coutre together with VOC-related documentation. The single most important commodity of trade was pepper. Dutch Admiral Jacob van Heemskerck reported in a letter dated 27 August, 1603, that Johor was “clearly the most suitable place in all of the East Indies to load pepper and sell textiles from Cambay and S[ã]o Thomé”.³⁷⁾ In fact, the Dutch treated Batu Sawar as a pepper port, with Matelieff identifying it together with Banten, Aceh, Kedah and Patani as one of the principal places where the Dutch could obtain sufficient cargoes of pepper.³⁸⁾ This pepper was not grown around in the region of the Johor River towns, but instead was brought in from Sumatra, especially Kampar, Indragiri, Jambi, and Siak.³⁹⁾ The quantities transacted in Johor are impressive. The Dutch factor at Johor, Abraham van den Broeck, reported transactions for the period January through July 1608, comprising 46,573 *kati* (about 27,944kg) of pepper with an assigned book value of 5,474:0:13¾ guilders and a second cargo comprising 76,819 *kati* (about 46,091kg) worth 9,751:12:3½ guilders.⁴⁰⁾ A report on Dutch cargos of

34) Meilink-Roelofs, M. A. P. 1962. *Asian Trade and European Influence in the Indonesian Archipelago between 1500 and about 1630*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 142.

35) Jonge, J. K. J. de. 1866-1909. *Opkomst van het Nederlandsch gezag in Oost-Indië: Verzameling van onuitgegeven stukken uit het oud-coloniaal archief*, 16 vols. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, III, 153.

36) *Ibid.*

37) Grotius, H. 2006. *De Jure Praedae Commentarius: Commentary on the Law of Prize and Booty*, Ittersum, M. J. van ed. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 539.

38) Matelieff, C., *Op. cit.*, 249.

39) Borschberg, P. 2017. The Value of Admiral Matelieff’s Writings for Studying the History of Southeast Asia, c.1600-1620, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 48(3), 414-435, 422.

40) VOC 626, Invoices and expenses made by the merchant Abraham van den Broeck at Batu Sawar in Johor, 1608 Jan. 1 to 1609 Feb. 2.

pepper loaded at Johor between 1601 and 1614 prepared by Adriaen van der Dussen lists two or three shiploads for each sailing season.⁴¹⁾

Other commodities of trade at Batu Sawar included gold that had been panned in the rivers of the peninsula, especially however in the Pahang and Muar rivers and their tributaries.⁴²⁾ Diamonds were also transacted by the Dutch in Batu Sawar. According to the English East India Company merchant John Saris, these were panned in the river beds of southern Borneo during the dry season.⁴³⁾ The number of raw diamonds transacted initially promised to be significant and valuable enough that the VOC decided to despatch a diamond expert to the Batu Sawar factory, though he later in September 1610 transferred to Sukadana on Borneo because the volume and value of the diamonds transacted was not substantial enough to warrant his posting in Johor.⁴⁴⁾ Still, the surviving VOC records further highlight that raw diamonds represented meaningful items of trade at Batu Sawar. In a report titled "Expenses and Provisions for the Fleet done at Johor", the VOC senior merchant Abraham van den Broeck in his entry for 20 January 1608 registered the acquisition of 151 raw diamonds of unspecified weight and quality worth 486:3:2 guilders.⁴⁵⁾ In addition to examining diamonds, the expert would also appraise bezoar stones which are concretions found in the intestines of certain animals and were believed to have medicinal properties as well as the power to ward off evil. Van den Broeck's entry mentions 11 bezoars with an assigned book value of 97:14:19½ guilders.⁴⁶⁾ Bezoars were expensive, and like gemstones they sold by the carat, with larger pieces fetching an exponentially higher price per carat. Fine spices from the Banda and Maluku Islands, tree resins (benzoin) and odoriferous woods (kalambak, gaharu, eaglewood) round out the main commodities available in Johor that were recorded as items of trade in the Dutch records.⁴⁷⁾ These were bartered for cotton textiles that the

41) VOC 1058, Letters received from the East Indies by the Gentlemen XVII and the Amsterdam Chamber, 1614-1794, 1616 First Book. Dussen, A. van der. Short report on the utility and profit, that the Dutch East India Company can expect from closing the Straits of Singapore, Kundur and Palembang, together with the damage that the Portuguese shall suffer in this region. Presented to the Hon. Gentleman, [Governor-] General Gerard Reijnst (1615).

42) Borschberg, P. 2019. *Op. cit.*, 7-9, 16.

43) Coutre, J. de. *Op. cit.*, 148; Jonge, *Op. cit.*, III, 303; Satow, E. M., ed. 1900. *The Voyage of Captain John Saris to Japan, 1613*. London: Hakluyt Society, 223-224.

44) VOC 1054, fols. 44v, 48r, 50r.

45) VOC 626.

46) *Ibid.*

47) Concerning trade in the fruits of the sea and jungle on the Malay Peninsula in general, as well as the reliance of the Malay sultans on the tribes of the sea and land, see Sopher, D. 1977. *The Sea Nomads. A Study of Maritime Boat People in Southeast Asia*. Singapore: National Museum. Concerning the tribes of the hinterland and their relations with the

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VOC procured along the Coromandel Coast of India, as well as in Bengal and Gujarat—those textiles from “Cambay and São Tomé” mentioned earlier by Van Heemskerck.

We are not certain how and where the transactions were conducted. Meilink-Roelofs claims that these were made aboard ships anchored in the port, but there must have also been transactions taking place on land.⁴⁸⁾ Van der Dussen’s cargo list covering the years 1601 through 1614 reports the size of cargo loadings in bahar, the price paid in ryals-of-eight, plus fees paid for the use of the royal scale and its weights of 1 *emas* (gold piece) per bahar, export taxes paid (at 5 per cent of the cargo value) plus gifts customarily distributed to senior members of the nobility.⁴⁹⁾ Based on this report, the aggregate costs of organizing exports from Johor ranged between about eight and eleven per cent. The value of the gifts was listed as part of the cost base. This was considered by the Dutch to be fair, and Van der Dussen reminded: “[In Johor], the tolls as well as the tyranny of the king are not as great as in Banten, and they are much more competent in the loading and unloading [of cargoes]. [Besides,] their [warehouses] are secured against fire”.⁵⁰⁾ The Dutch were expecting an upturn of business in Johor, driven mainly by merchants from China and Patani.

What can the reader take away from answering the first overarching question in part II of this article? Batu Sawar, the capital of Johor, was a well-frequented commercial center situated near the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula. It was situated on the strategically located Johor River, chiefly constructed of perishables, and fortified by wooden palisades. There were many resident merchants active here who bartered pepper, unminted gold, uncut gems and precious woods in exchange for reals of eight and cotton pieces from India. Part of the attraction was the proactive attitude of the Johor ruler who welcomed foreign merchants to his shores, and the comparatively modest fee structure that created business overheads of approximately 8 to 11 per cent. In comparison to Banten which was a larger and more established port, the fees and handling of the cargo were better, and warehouses, moreover, were better protected against frequent fires. Within just a few years the Dutch would close their factory at Johor and over the next few decades refocus their operations on Java and the Spice Islands (Maluku and Banda groups). This was partially in response to inadequate supplies streaming in from the region, but perhaps more importantly the outcome of the company’s operational

Malay rulers generally, see Dunn, F. L. 1975. *Rain-forest collectors and traders; a study of resource utilization in modern and ancient Malaya*. Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society.

48) Meilink-Roelofs, *Op. cit.*, 141.

49) For an earlier period, Meilink-Roelofs claimed Johor’s success as a trading center was based on a combination of low taxes and compulsion, but was too close to Portuguese Melaka and was thus hampered in its further development, *Ibid.*

50) VOC 1058, 51r.

reorientation. The question that emerges in the context of the present discussion is this: If it was such a prosperous place, why did Batu Sawar decline and disappear? This is the overarching question that will be addressed in the following section.

III. Why did Batu Sawar decline?

In part II of this article, we examined the factors that led Batu Sawar's rise as a regional trading center in the South of the Malay Peninsula at the turn of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In part III we correspondingly explore the factors that led to the city's decline both as a trading center and as a sizeable settlement. Without doubt, the Acehese attack on Johor in 1613 and the destruction of Batu Sawar by fire are certainly contributing factors, but the seeds for the city's decline had already been sown well before that tragic event. In the following, we consider some of the factors, starting with security.

1. Security

Starting with Matelieff's visit to Batu Sawar in 1606, the Dutch became concerned about Johor's security, as repeated raids and riverine blockades by the Portuguese from Melaka laid settlements to ashes and crippled commerce. As he explains in his *Journal*, Matelieff surveyed Batu Sawar's urban defenses and advised to make improvements on three structures near the Johor River. His main observation was that the plain on which one of the defensive structures was built was regularly flooded and thus unsuitable for permanently positioning artillery:

The land lies low and is flooded with every spring tide, so that one cannot bring cannons into position outside the city. The admiral told them to start by making three bulwarks to flank the walls—the idea pleased them, but they were afraid of the work.⁵¹⁾

In a letter addressed to the next fleet commander to arrive from Europe dated 4 January 1608, Matelieff was even more explicit about this episode: "I taught the Malays to fortify their city and they promised to do it. Then what? They do not want to work. As soon as I had gone, they left the work

51) Matelieff, C., *Op. cit.*, 192.

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as it was”.⁵²⁾ The additional fortification work, therefore, remained unfinished, leaving the capital exposed to attack. Matelieff may have blamed the unfinished work on indolence, but the reasons were certainly more complex and included the timing of the additional work on the fortifications (during the rainy season), and probably also distrust of the Dutch on part of the Johoreans. Matelieff extended a loan to the Johor rulers that was to be repaid in kind (e.g. in pepper), and promised that in future the company would furnish arms and munitions.⁵³⁾ Matelieff assured Johor that it could call on the assistance of any Dutch vessels passing through the nearby Singapore Straits, if they needed help, but the Johor rulers feared a fresh Portuguese raid or blockade and insisted that the Dutch remain anchored in the river until more Dutch ships arrived. These were Johor’s fears: “As soon as [the Dutch] left, the [Johor] king thought that the Portuguese would arrive immediately, and he and his people would be lost.”⁵⁴⁾ Despite these pleas Matelieff raised anchor and set sail. It would be more than another two years before the next Dutch fleet commander dropped anchor in the waters of the Johor River: Pieter Willemsz. Verhoeff.

Now, Verhoeff was under instructions from the VOC directors in Europe to ascertain the possibility of launching a joint attack with Johor on Portuguese Melaka and to sound out the Johor ruler about the construction of a fortification either in the lower reaches of the Johor River, or alternatively, somewhere nearby in the Singapore Straits. The Johoreans though did not want to give the Dutch such a commanding position over their river, and declined the request.⁵⁵⁾ After Verhoeff’s departure, the Portuguese naval squadrons returned and imposed another one of their riverine blockades. In February 1610 the Dutch factor at Batu Sawar, Jacques Obelaer, reported the presence of two Portuguese vessels anchored in the lower reaches of the Johor River off the Hook of Berbukit (today’s Tanjung Pengerang) opposite Changi in Singapore.⁵⁶⁾ The blockade which, as Obelaer reports, lasted for one year lent a devastating blow to Batu Sawar’s trade.⁵⁷⁾ At the initiative of the Portuguese and after weeks of exerting pressure on the Johor court, a peace treaty was proclaimed between Johor and Portugal in October 1610.⁵⁸⁾ The following year, on 1 December 1611, the new Dutch factor at Johor, Hendrik van Boeckolt, penned a letter to the Portuguese captain of Melaka in

52) *Ibid.*, 237.

53) *Ibid.*, 193.

54) *Ibid.*

55) Matelieff, C., *Op. cit.*, 346.

56) VOC 1054, 42r.

57) *Ibid.*, f. 50v.

58) *Ibid.*, 47r, 53r.

which he reported that “not long ago” the “rogue and traitor”, Jacques Obelaer, a former factor at Batu Sawar, had defected to Melaka with the help of some Portuguese emissaries who had recently come to Johor.⁵⁹⁾

2. Court politics and factionalism

At the Batu Sawar court there was lots of political wrangling between the four surviving sons of Sultan Ali Jalla bin Abdul Jalil who are known from Dutch and Portuguese sources as the Yang di Pertuan (“king”), Raja Siak, Raja Laut, and Raja Bongsu (aka Raja Seberang and Raja di Ilir).⁶⁰⁾ It would appear that Matelieff may have met them during his time in Batu Sawar, and had nothing positive to say about them except for the youngest of the princes, Raja Bongsu. All of them were active in trade (and presumably plunder), but apart from Raja Bongsu, Matelieff saw all of them to be in the proverbial pocket of the Portuguese. This is a significant observation because Siak—ruled as we have seen by one of the four brothers—was a key source of commodities being sold in Johor. Peace with Portuguese Melaka in October 1610 represents a triumph of the pro-Portuguese faction at the court over Raja Bongsu who was “wonderfully inclined towards us [the Dutch]”.⁶¹⁾ But while he functioned a supporter and spokesman of the Dutch and defended VOC interests at the Batu Sawar court, it was also clear to Matelieff that in the end “Raja Seberang (i.e., Raja Bongsu) has no power”. And the reason? “[H]e dare not command the noblemen, the noblemen do not want him as their king, for then they would not have as much power as they have now; so things stay in between”.⁶²⁾ In other words, the nobles exploited and benefitted from a fractured leadership, a contrast to the situation in Johor before 1597 when the father of the four princes, Raja Ali Jalla bin Abdul Jalil, still ruled.

Commenting on the situation at Johor after his return to Europe, Admiral Matelieff summed up the deplorable situation in a report dated 31 August 1610. In this he lamented:

The king of Johor, who is our friend, is being reduced to misery because of our friendship. Moreover, the pepper his land produces is transported to Patani and bought at a higher price by us there than in Johor. Thus, we deprive him of trade while we ought to do the opposite, and

59) Obelaer must have absconded sometime between late December 1610 and the date of this letter. Obelaer’s final surviving piece of business at the Batu Sawar factory is dated 28 Dec. 1610 and addressed to Jacques l’Hermite in Banten (VOC 1054, f. 52).

60) Matelieff, C., *Op. cit.*, 153-4.

61) *Ibid.*, 237.

62) *Ibid.*

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we drive the trade toward the people of Patani, who have none themselves and who make us pay as much toll as they want to.⁶³⁾

Consequently, peace with Portugal, political machinations at the Batu Sawar court, greed, lack of authority and supervision combined with Dutch neglect of commerce in Johor all contributed toward a toxic mix that would soon explode: Aceh's attack on Johor.

3. Acehnese Yoke

At the end of June in the year 1613 Sultan Iskandar Muda of Aceh launched a seaborne attack on Johor for reasons that are complex. He eyed dominance on both sides of the Melaka Strait and in a letter to King James I and VI of England and Scotland from the year 1615 described himself as a great raja "who holds in his palm many hundreds of rajas from the eastern side, who are situated in the *negeri* [settlement, country] which are subject to Deli, and in the *negeri* which are subject to Batu Sawar, and from the western side in the *negeri* which are subject to Pariaman and Barus".⁶⁴⁾ Iskandar Muda was disturbed by the peace between Johor and his enemy, Portuguese Melaka. The estimated number of oared ships and men involved in this onslaught vary considerably but suffice it to say that the numbers were overwhelming. A European ship that was resting at anchor in the Johor River was caught in the action with about twenty members of its crew captured and taken prisoner to Aceh.⁶⁵⁾ Singapore (as a base of the Johor armada) and Batu Sawar were destroyed by fire. At the VOC factory in Batu Sawar employees buried valuables and deliberately set the premises ablaze, causing a considerable loss to the company estimated in a report dating from 1614 at 45,000 guilders. Itemized losses included stocks of pepper, benzoin, cottons, gold and cash.⁶⁶⁾

Batu Sawar would hardly be the same again. Efforts were undertaken to rebuild the city, but reports emanating from the Dutch factory claimed that business was well down after the conflict. There were significant political changes too. The old Yang di Pertuan, Ala'udin Ri'ayat Shah III, is rumored to have died either in captivity in Aceh or as a broken man on the nearby island of Bintan. The youngest brother, the aforementioned Raja Bongsu, was married off to a sister of Iskandar

63) *Ibid.*, 350.

64) Drakard, J. 2008-2009. Inscribing Sumatra: Perceptions of place and space in Acehnese and Minangkabau Royal Letters, *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient (BEFEO)* 95-96, 135-189, 147.

65) Foster, W., ed. 1934. *The Voyage of Thomas Best to the East Indies 1612-1614*. London: Hakluyt Society, 169.

66) Tiele, P. A. & Heeres, J. E., eds. 1886-1895. *Bouwstoffen voor de Geschiedenis der Nederlanders in den Maleischen Archipel*, 3 vols. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, I, 66-69.

Muda and returned to Johor where he ruled as Sultan Abdul Hammayat Shah for almost a decade. In contrast to his other two brothers, his anti-Portuguese and pro-Dutch credentials may have proved important for his (Acehnese-backed) installation as sultan. Granted, during the first few years of his reign, Sultan Abdullah appeared determined to pull his people back together and establish his court. He now even seems to have had a change of heart and in 1614 invited the Dutch to scout for and select a place where they could construct a fortress either in the lower reaches of the Johor River or in the Singapore Straits. As Adriaen van der Dussen explains in a report written in the year 1615,

The king of Johor, Raja Bongsu, now in place of his brother, the Yang di Pertuan, presents us no little help and assistance, offering and entrusting to us the well-known islands around the Straits of Singapore which are under his control. Yes, he also [offered us] a place at the mouth of his river that flows from Johor to Batu Sawar (where the current king holds both residence and court) to build a fort and force and which we certainly could keep.⁶⁷⁾

Van der Dussen, who acted as the head of the 1614 VOC delegation to Johor, inspected several locations, but his choice for the new Dutch fort ultimately fell on the north-eastern coast of Karimun Besar. That fortification, however, was never built and Sultan Abdullah proved to be a recalcitrant tributary of Aceh. For this reason the Acehnese attacked the enlarged and reconstructed capital Batu Sawar went up in flames anew in November 1615.⁶⁸⁾ Hereafter, Winstedt claims, “Sultan Abdullah led the life of a hunted wander” and was moving about the waters until his death on the island of Tambelan Besar in 1623.⁶⁹⁾ As Winstedt conceded in his *History of Johor*: “The conquest of Batu Sawar by the Achinese in 1615 closes one chapter of Johor history as the conquest of Johor Lama by the Portuguese in 1587 had closed another, and it appeared to the Dutch Government that the renowned kingdom of Johor had come to an end”.⁷⁰⁾

Even before the Acehnese attack of 1615, Sultan Abdullah had spent much time and energy dealing with the succession crisis in Pahang, as is insinuated by Adriaen van der Dussen in a report filed in November 1614.⁷¹⁾ These latter two points are important for our discussion: as the years

67) VOC 1058.

68) Colenbrander, H. T. & Coolhaas, W. Ph. eds., 1919-1953. *Jan Pieterszoon Coen: Bescheiden Omtrent Zijn Bedrijf in Indië*, 9 vols. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, I, 135.

69) Winstedt, R. O., *Op. cit.*, 35, 140.

70) *Ibid.*, 35.

71) Jonge, *Op. cit.*, III, 79.

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progressed, Johor did not have a stable court location in the decade leading up to 1623. Without the presence of the court and ruler (and their business), Batu Sawar could simply not regain the same significance it had in its heyday before 1613, even if it had been reportedly rebuilt and enlarged according to a testimony from October 1615—written about a month before the city’s renewed destruction.⁷²⁾ Portuguese documents written over the course of the next two decades were critical of Aceh’s domination of Johor and Pahang, and regarded this as a threat to Portuguese Melaka’s own security. Indeed, the business environment had deteriorated so badly that the Dutch decided to cut their losses and permanently shutter their factory at Johor. Hereafter, they focused on other regional pepper ports including Banten, Jambi, Aceh and for a few more years also Patani.

What can the reader take away from this section exploring the reasons for Batu Sawar’s decline? As has been seen, the city’s decline as an urban and trading center hinged on several long-term developments and external shocks. Among the long-term factors contributing to the decline are Batu Sawar’s poor defences, the practice of immolating the town in times of danger, and factionalism among the four surviving sons of Raja Ali Jalla bin Abdul Jalil who passed away around 1597. This factionalism, moreover, contributed to the formation of blocks each supporting the Portuguese or the Dutch in turn, with the former evidently gaining the upper hand (albeit briefly) between around October 1610 and June 1613. One position is that Johor was too close to Portuguese Melaka to be successful, and as such was under constant threat of attack and destruction for much of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Among the shocks that they inflicted and are discussed in this article are the destruction of Johor Lama, repeated riverine blockades (especially in 1603-1604 and 1609-1610), as well as the attack by Sultan Iskandar Muda of Aceh and his troops in mid-1613. Although Batu Sawar was reportedly rebuilt and destroyed again within two years in 1613 and 1615 respectively, it faced challenges to reach former levels of prosperity. The long absences of the ruler, Sultan Abdullah Hammayat Shah after 1613 seem to have caused the malleable trading networks to shift to other regional ports. The subsequent closure of the Dutch factory at Batu Sawar has to do with the changing priorities of the VOC and its efforts to contain costs, but it is also symptomatic of the city’s decline.

72) Winstedt, R. O., *Op. cit.*, 140.

IV. Conclusion

This article has focused on the topic of urban and functional impermanence by using Batu Sawar as a documented example. It addressed two overarching and related questions that begin with “why?” and thus invite to identify and explore underlying reasons: Why and when did Batu Sawar become a significant center of trade? Why and when did Batu Sawar disappear as a functioning trading center and capital city? With reference to the rise of Batu Sawar we identified a series of factors that significantly include geographic location, the presence of a royal court, and the ready availability of goods and commodities for trade or barter. Crucial to its success was its position at the confluence of overland, riverine and maritime trading networks and the presence of traders and artisans. The city itself was constructed of perishable and flammable materials which exposed Batu Sawar to fires, both accidental and deliberate. The mobility of its population, shifts within the Johor royal court, the malleable networks of trade and the construction of buildings using perishable materials can all be used to explain why the city could flourish, but also quickly disappear.

Batu Sawar also had some unique features that sowed the seeds of its destruction: poorly built defense structures, a fragmented and factional royal court, and its unwelcomed role in the unfolding conflict between the Portuguese and the Dutch over commercial relevance in the region. Although Batu Sawar had vanished by the late seventeenth century, it continued to feature prominently in glossaries and dictionaries printed in Europe well into the eighteenth century, lending the false and misleading impression that it was still a viable riverine port and settlement.

There remains one final question raised by this article that still needs express answering: Why was Batu Sawar remembered long after its eclipse in European reference and geographical materials? There are two factors worth raising. The first is the long memory or echo of a famous trading emporium at the tip of the Malay Peninsula—though the exact location of this famous trading center may not have been precisely known— and historically it did move around from the mainland to the nearby islands as well as at different sites along the Johor River. Batu Sawar was one of the best-documented sites, particularly in the popular travel literature of the early seventeenth century and their reprints well into the 1700s. The second reason has to do with the power of the description: it was vividly described in terms of a city, complete with a study of its urban layout and locational advantages. Even though cities were destroyed and rebuilt or lost their significance resulting from long-term shifts in trading patterns across the European continent, it was hardly imaginable that a city with such important trans-regional trading links could simply vanish or disappear. The long memory of Batu Sawar was therefore due to several factors, ranging from the city’s reputation in Europe as an

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important trading center to the power of European popular imagination.

In a final instance, a broader conclusion may also be warranted: while several factors certainly contributed to the rise and decline of Batu Sawar over the course of just a few decades, more research is needed into this phenomenon of urban impermanence. Rather than being a unique phase in the seventeenth century, the periodic shifts in Johor's royal capitals are also indicative of other forces at work: politico-economic tensions of the coast and interior, strategies for survival against an enemy, or even the need on part of the Johor rulers to periodically reinvent and reinvigorate the polity. In this regard Batu Sawar would not differ much from nearby Singapore.⁷³⁾

Ethical considerations

Ethical issues (including plagiarism, informed consent, misconduct, data fabrication and/or falsification, double publication and/or submission, and redundancy) have been completely observed by author.

Conflict of Interest

The author has no conflict of interests to declare.

73) Hack, K., Margolin, J.-L., & Delaye, K., eds., *Op. cit.*

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